



January 28, 2011

Neil Brown, Editor and Vice-President  
St. Petersburg Times  
490 First Avenue South  
St. Petersburg, FL 33701

**Letter to the Editor:**

**Re: "St. Petersburg Housing Authority wants a new office building — but already owns one" (January 28, 2011) and "St. Petersburg Housing Authority paid \$1 million for land appraised at half as much" (January 21, 2011)**

It seems as though the St. Petersburg Times is trying to create controversy where none exists.

The intent of the Center for Achievement is to be an educational resource for the residents of Midtown, not an office for the St. Petersburg Housing Authority (SPHA). SPHA's Board of Commissioners has never considered evicting the College to put our administrative offices in its place, and doesn't believe that it is in the best interest of the community. While we have listed the building for sale, we would like it to remain a permanent educational complex that will benefit Midtown residents, including Jordan Park. The Center for Achievement has been leased to St. Petersburg College since 2003, and the College currently has classes scheduled. SPHA is hopeful that the College will remain there, either as an owner or a Lessee.

All real estate sales or acquisitions are Board approved business decisions that reflect the Board's mission to provide a variety of safe, sanitary, accessible, decent and affordable housing and a desired portfolio to supplement dwindling U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding. We have developed a long-term plan to divest of commercial properties not in line with our mission, to acquire or develop more affordable housing, and to deconcentrate areas of poverty throughout our entire jurisdiction per federal regulations. SPHA's choice of locating its Central Office outside of traditional public housing communities and areas of concentrated poverty is in line with this strategy. SPHA's planned location in the Gateway Business Center affords our residents exposure to new housing and economic opportunities.

The decision to purchase the five-acre parcel of land was carefully considered, despite what the Times reporter implies. Over the past two years, SPHA has reviewed at least 21 properties, including both land and existing structures. Our entire Board of Commissioners has publicly discussed these options in Board and committee meetings throughout the process, and we also have presented them to the City Council's Housing Committee. Weighing construction costs against rehabilitation costs, the Gandy property best fit our needs and was the most cost-effective choice. In fact, the Times was provided with a list of current properties and sales comparables from the housing authority and the seller's agent, clearly demonstrating that \$200,000 an acre is a very good price for land that already includes a full pad and utilities.

SPHA purchased the property with non-federal dollars, which means that no tax payer funds have been invested in the project to date. We planned from the outset to construct our office on a small portion of the land, and the remaining acreage was intended for Wounded Warrior housing. However, despite initial positive discussions, the city would not allow the housing authority to move forward with those plans. The

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housing authority will be selling the excess 3.6 acres, and the sale proceeds will be used to reimburse the land cost.

As far as the plans for the new building, there has been much focus on a door, a plug and an empty room. The "covered entrance" to the chief executive officer's office is just a door, designed the same as other entrances throughout the building. While a small room has been set-aside in the plans for a "wellness center for workouts," no exercise equipment has been purchased, and the housing authority has no plans for its purchase. The "wall-mounted flat-screen television" in the CEO's office is no more than a wall outlet for potential wall mounted video equipment, if a need ever is determined for it. Again, there are no plans to purchase a flat screen television, but we thought it prudent to adequately wire the office for the future.

While the Times reporter has all of the above information, none was included in either of his recent articles on the housing authority. There were sensational quotes, but a deficit of facts.

Also not reported, yet discussed at the January 27 board meeting at which the reporter was present, was the fact that SPHA has once again been named a "High Performer" by HUD. This is a considerable achievement for any housing authority and should be a mark of pride for the city of St. Petersburg. SPHA is among a select number of housing authorities, out of approximately 3,200 nationwide, to achieve and maintain this prominent designation. The "High Performer" is HUD's highest rating, and SPHA's excellent programs and services have earned it consistently for the past decade.

In addition, SPHA undergoes an annual independent audit to make sure we are operating financially sound. The results of the audits conducted throughout our current CEO's tenure have been excellent, and the audits for the last three consecutive years have concluded with zero findings.

While we understand the St. Petersburg Times' role as a governmental watch dog, we feel that more balance is called for. The recent articles have a decidedly negative slant, which was recognized by other submissions to your "Letters to the Editor," and the good work that the housing authority is doing for its residents is decidedly ignored. We hope that future articles about our agency will focus more on the issues as they are and less on manufactured controversy.

Sincerely,



Dr. Arnett Smith, Chairman, Board of Commissioners of the St. Petersburg Housing Authority